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WORDSWORTH AND THE BRAMBLE

The *Atlantic Monthly* for November, 1919, contains an essay by Professor Chauncey B. Tinker on *The Poet, the Bramble, and Reconstruction*. After commending Lord De Tabley, Victorian, a poet and authority on brambles, the essayist proceeds with a deft arrangement of various allusions to the bramble in the writings of Shakespeare, Chaucer, and Milton, in the Bible, in 'a mediæval work on leechworts and simples,' in the *Treasury of Botany*, on the lips of the nursery rhymester, and in the poetry of Wordsworth. Professor Tinker refers somewhat vaguely to the species of the *rubus*; botanical accuracy is not his purpose. And if we disregard questions arising from his use of the term *bramble*, the sketch is not 'rather bleak,' as he suggests, but wholly delightful. We should be churlish to demand a strict definition where the writer's choice of instances does not mislead us.

Wordsworth's estimate of the bramble, however, is neither fully nor justly indicated. Professor Tinker writes:

'It might have been expected that Wordsworth, with his eye dutifully upon the object, would have had something to say of the blackberry bramble; yet I recall but one reference in his poetry, and that not untouched with contempt:

The gadding bramble hangs her purple fruit.

And even this line, which, by the way, is somewhat suggestive of the despised manner of the eighteenth-century poet, wastes what little sweetness it has upon the desert air of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*. I fear that, when all is said, Lord De Tabley must be acknowledged as the undisputed monarch of the bramble world.¹

Be it said that in the 'desert air' of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* flourish 'hyacinths,' the 'lily,' and 'daisies,' 'sweet pastoral flowers' for 'vernal posy' or for 'garland gay.' 'Grass' and 'moss'—'green moss'—'ivy,' 'herbs,' and 'the tender sod' are here; and the 'reverend hawthorns,' 'laurels,' and 'fresh holly,' too. By virtue of its 'crown of weeds' and its 'crown of thorns' this is no desert. Here strike the roots of 'the pine-tree,' here are 'palm-groves,' the 'elm,' and 'forest-oaks' and 'chestnut-wood.' And if the 'flowers of chivalry' and 'fancied roses'

¹ *Atlantic Monthly* 124.672.

perfume the desert air in vain, there are 'wreaths that shall not fail,' 'Heaven-born flowers,' 'immortal amaranth and palms.'²

Moreover, the one reference to the blackberry-bramble in the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* is not the sole reference to the bramble in Wordsworth's poetry. Professor Cooper's *Concordance to the Poems of William Wordsworth* contains under *bramble*, *bramble-leaf*, *brambles*, seven citations.³ There are also two relevant passages in the *Description of the Scenery of the Lakes*; at least one is to be found among Wordsworth's letters; and the *Journals* of Dorothy Wordsworth have several comments of value for defining and interpreting her brother's artistic treatment of this theme.

An entry in Dorothy's *Journal* for February 15, 1798, will serve to begin the series:

'Gathered sticks in the further wood. The dell green with moss and brambles, and the tall and slender pillars of the unbranching oaks.'⁴

A month later:

'The spring continues to advance very slowly, no green trees, the hedges leafless; nothing green but the brambles that still retain their old leaves, the evergreens, and the palms, which indeed are not absolutely green. Some brambles I observed to-day budding afresh, and those have shed their old leaves. The crooked arm of the old oak-tree points upwards to the moon.'⁵

Through some such dell or country-side as this the 'enduring Ass' in *Peter Bell*

Moves on without a moment's stop,
Nor once turns round his head to crop
A bramble-leaf or blade of grass.⁶

² The references in this paragraph are to *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*

1.27.14	1.10.10	3.33.11	2.12.10
2.15.4,7	3.40.13	3.34.12	2.7.7
3.39.10	1.21.11	1.8.8	2.25.7
1.1.11	2.12.9	3.40.5	2.7.8
3.22.3	3.41.9	3.17.6	2.1.7
3.32.7	3.39.5	1.21.11	1.1.14
3.31.9	1.1.11	3.39.7	

The edition of Wordsworth's *Poetical Works* by Hutchinson, which is frequently cited in this article, will be hereafter referred to as *P. W.*

³ P. 93.

⁴ *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. by Knight, 1.9. This work is hereafter referred to as *Journals*.

⁵ *Journals* 1. 14-15.

⁶ *Peter Bell* 712-715 (*P. W.*, p. 244).

Such may have been the brambles eluded by Wordsworth on those nutting-expeditions of his boyhood, when he turned his steps

Tow'rd some far-distant wood, a Figure quaint,
Tricked out in proud disguise of cast-off weeds
Which for that service had been husbanded,
By exhortation of my frugal Dame—
Motley accoutrement, of power to smile
At thorns, and brakes, and brambles,—and in truth
More ragged than need was!⁷

Remembering that Wordsworth set aside *The Prelude* in 1800, and seems for the time to have exhausted himself by the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, we read with interest of the knight whose history was that year *Written with a Slate Pencil upon a Stone, the Largest of a Heap Lying near a Deserted Quarry, upon One of the Islands at Rydal*. He

Desisted, and the quarry and the mound
Are monuments of his unfinished task.⁸

To the bramble the poet consigned the fragments:

If thou art one
On fire with thy impatience to become
An inmate of these mountains,—if, disturbed
By beautiful conceptions, thou hast hewn
Out of the quiet rock the elements
Of thy trim Mansion destined soon to blaze
In snow-white splendour,—think again; and, taught
By old Sir William and his quarry, leave
Thy fragments to the bramble and the rose;
There let the vernal slow-worm sun himself,
And let the redbreast hop from stone to stone.⁹

'The unfinished task' preoccupies other poems of 1800. Wordsworth has said of Leonard

So he relinquished all his purposes.¹⁰

Michael's sheep-fold, too, was

unfinished when he died;¹¹

. . . and 'tis believed by all
That many and many a day he thither went,
And never lifted up a single stone.¹²

⁷ *Nutting* 8–14 (*P. W.*, p. 185).

⁸ Lines 12–13 (*P. W.*, p. 548).

⁹ Lines 25–35 (*P. W.*, pp. 548–549).

¹⁰ *The Brothers* 427 (*P. W.*, p. 102).

¹¹ *Michael* 472 (*P. W.*, p. 138).

¹² *Ibid.* 464–466.

The Idle Shepherd-Boys and the 'forlorn *Hic jacet!*' of Bruce's grave date from 1800. But, happily, 1800 is the year when the poet hopes for the dust of the pleasure-house of *Hart-leap Well* that

. . . Nature, in due course of time, once more
Shall here put on her beauty and her bloom.¹³

Briar-rose or bramble, no doubt, will be the pioneer in the reconstruction. And there is to be a new precision of the observing eye and the contemplating mind. This is made evident in Wordsworth's *Poems on the Naming of Places*, 1800, and in Dorothy's wish to label nature's 'beauty and her bloom.' We read in the *Journal* for May 16, 1800:

'I carried a basket for mosses, and gathered some wild plants. Oh! that we had a book of botany.'¹⁴

Coleridge and Dorothy temporarily dispensed with the bramble on September 1, 1800, and there was rejoicing:

'After dinner, Coleridge discovered a rock-seat in the orchard. Cleared away many brambles. Coleridge went to bed after tea. John and I followed Wm. up the hill, and then returned to go to Mr. Simpson's. We borrowed some bottles for bottling rum. The evening somewhat frosty and grey, but very pleasant. I broiled Coleridge a mutton-chop, which he ate in bed.'¹⁵

Yet by October 17 'Coleridge had done nothing for the L. B.'¹⁶ We are not told whether the bramble crept again over the rock-seat.

The poems of 1802 and 1803 are themselves fragmentary, although in them we may trace the beginning of sonnet-series, and are supplied with the elements from which later the *Memorials of a Tour in Scotland*, 1803, were developed. Dorothy furnishes evidence that William used his own walking-stick on this tour—and lost it!

'William climbed up the rock, which would have been no easy task but to a mountaineer, and we constructed a rope of pocket-handkerchiefs, garters, plaids, coats, etc., and measured its height. It was *so* many times the length of William's walking-stick, but, unfortunately, having lost the stick, we have lost the measure.'¹⁷

¹³ *Hart-leap Well* 171-172 (*P. W.*, p. 203).

¹⁴ *Journals* 1. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 1. 47-48.

¹⁶ *I. e.*, *The Lyrical Ballads*; see *Journals* 1. 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 2. 108.

What better warning could we wish for the poet who writes, the critic who measures, the warrior who will 'take the shortest way'?¹⁸

In *Rob Roy's Grave*¹⁹ Wordsworth discusses this very problem of 'strength of prowess or of wit' as against 'books' and 'statutes':

'For why?—Because the good old rule
Sufficeth them, the simple plan,
That they should take, who have the power,
And they should keep who can.'

Again:

And to his Sword he would have said,
'Do Thou my sovereign will enact
From land to land through half the earth!
Judge thou of law and fact!'

But Rob Roy 'came an age too late'; for 'Polity was then too strong.' Now polity had marked Wordsworth for her own, although in 1803 he would 'clear the weeds from off' the grave of 'brave Rob Roy.'

What were these weeds? Dorothy has described the burial-place of the lairds of Glengyle as

'a dismal spot, containing four or five graves overgrown with long grass, nettles, and brambles.'²⁰

She repeats and intensifies this impression at the reputed grave of Rob Roy:

'There were several tomb-stones, but the inscriptions were either worn-out or unintelligible to us, and the place choked up with nettles and brambles.'²¹

It was left for Wordsworth to give these memories their authentic form in *The Highland Broach*:

The heroic Age expired—it slept
Deep in its tomb:—the bramble crept
O'er Fingal's hearth; the grassy sod
Grew on the floors his sons had trod.²²

Not alone does the bramble set its thorny seal upon the 'heroic Age'; its wreath is no less appropriate to the age of

¹⁸ *Rob Roy's Grave* 56 (*P. W.*, p. 291).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 50, 21, 22, 37–40, 77–80, 64, 63, 6, 5.

²⁰ *Journals* 1. 245.

²¹ *Ibid.* 2. 111–112.

²² Lines 31–34 (*P. W.*, p. 390).

polity. It trails the quick and the dead. Dorothy remarked at Luss on Lake Lomond:

'How elegant were the wreaths of the bramble that had "built its own bower" upon the riggins in several parts of the village'.²³

Dorothy and Wordsworth saw brambles—with other things—during November, 1805, in Gowborough Park. The brother's recast of the sister's journal was presumably not made until 1835, but the bramble finds a due place in the whole, and only a due place. Dorothy wrote:

'The trees in Gowborough Park were very beautiful, the hawthorns leafless, their round heads covered with rich red berries, and adorned with arches of green brambles; and eglantine hung with glossy hips; many birches yet tricked out in full foliage of bright yellow; oaks brown or leafless; the smooth branches of the ashes bare; most of the alders green as in spring.'²⁴

Wordsworth revised this to read:

'The hawthorns were leafless; their round heads covered with rich green [? red] berries, and adorned with arches of green brambles, and eglantines hung with glossy hips; and the grey trunks of some of the ancient oaks, which in the summer season might have been regarded only for their venerable majesty, now attracted notice by a pretty embellishment of green mosses and fern, intermixed with russet leaves retained by those slender outstarting twigs which the veteran tree would not have tolerated in his strength. The smooth silver branches of the ashes were bare; most of the alders as green as the Devonshire cottage-myrtle that weathers the snows of Christmas.'²⁵

A memorable reference to the bramble occurs at the end of the letter of December, 1806, in which Wordsworth's plans for the Beaumont winter-garden were set forth:

'Few of the more minute rural appearances please me more than these, of one shrub or flower lending its ornaments to another. There is a pretty instance of this kind now to be seen near Mr. Craig's new walk; a bramble which has furnished a wild rose with its green leaves, while the rose in turn with its red hips has to the utmost of its power embellished the bramble. Mr. Graham in his *Birds of Scotland* has an exquisite passage upon this subject, with which I will conclude:

The hawthorn there,
With moss and lichens grey, dies of old age,
Up to the upmost branches climbs the rose
And mingles with the fading blooms of May,
While round the brier the honeysuckle wreaths

²³ *Journals* 1. 222.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 2. 159-160.

²⁵ *Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by Knight, 2. 114-115.

Entwine, and with their sweet perfume embalm
The dying rose.²⁶

This co-operative function of the bramble Wordsworth even more generously acknowledged when he added a parenthesis to the *Description of the Scenery of the Lakes* in the edition of 1823:

'The process by which she [Nature] forms woods and forests is as follows. Seeds are scattered indiscriminately by winds, brought by waters, and dropped by birds. They perish, or produce, according as the soil and situation upon which they fall are suited to them; and under the same dependence, the seedling or the sucker, if not cropped by animals (which Nature is often careful to prevent by fencing it about with brambles or other prickly shrubs), thrives, and the tree grows, sometimes single, taking its own shape without constraint, but for the most part compelled to conform itself to some law imposed upon it by its neighbours. From low and sheltered places, vegetation travels upwards to the more exposed; and the young plants are protected, and to a certain degree fashioned, by those that have preceded them.'²⁷

The *Description* was first published in 1810; Wordsworth's parenthesis, we note, was not added until 1823. Thus the decade or so which terminated in the 'desert' waste of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* brought to the forest its bramble.

With similar regard for the cost of a cosmic pageant, fencing bramble and cropping animal had appeared in *The Excursion*, where the 'rustic Boy' was compared to

a lamb enthralled
'Mid thorns and brambles.²⁸

Wordsworth's eye is 'dutifully upon the object,' but in both cases his mind no less dutifully ranges among purposes. Did he not say in 1815 that it was the function of the judgment

'to decide how and where, and in what degree, each of these faculties [Observation, Description, Sensibility, Reflection, Imagination, Fancy, and Invention] ought to be exerted; so that the less shall not be sacrificed to the greater; nor the greater, slighting the less, arrogate, to its own injury, more than its due?'²⁹

But the roots of this particular bramble strike down into the *Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*. In that tirade of his youth Wordsworth had ironically said:

²⁶ *Letters of the Wordsworth Family*, ed. by Knight, 1. 283-284.

²⁷ *Prose Works*, ed. by Knight, 2. 78.

²⁸ Lines 170-171 (*P. W.*, p. 886).

²⁹ *P. W.*, p. 954.

'I congratulate your Lordship upon your enthusiastic fondness for the judicial proceedings of this country. I am happy to find you have passed through life without having your fleece torn from your back in the thorny labyrinth of litigation.'³⁰

The thorns of litigation, wardens of the justice which is so frequently bespoken in the *Convention of Cintra*,³¹ the justice which is the last cadence to fall upon the 'desert air' of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets*,³² deserve their part with the brambles of the forest. These debts the Wordsworth of later years knew how to pay.

That one of the *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* which monopolizes the 'little sweetness' of the sole bramble which Professor Tinker remembers in the poetry of Wordsworth may be quoted in full:

DISSOLUTION OF THE MONASTERIES

Threats come which no submission may assuage,
No sacrifice avert, no power dispute;
The tapers shall be quenched, the belfries mute,
And, 'mid their choirs unroofed by selfish rage,
The warbling wren shall find a leafy cage;
The gadding bramble hang her purple fruit;
And the green lizard and the gilded newt
Lead unmolested lives, and die of age.
The owl of evening and the woodland fox
For their abode the shrines of Waltham choose:
Proud Glastonbury can no more refuse
To stoop her head before these desperate shocks—
She whose high pomp displaced, as story tells,
Arimathean Joseph's wattled cells.³³

And with this sonnet should be considered those stanzas of *Fort Fuentes* to which it is related, and probably indebted:

Dread hour! when, upheaved by war's sulphurous blast,
This sweet-visaged Cherub of Parian stone
So far from the holy enclosure was cast,
To couch in this thicket of brambles alone,

To rest where the lizard may bask in the palm
Of his half-open hand pure from blemish or speck;
And the green, gilded snake, without troubling the calm
Of the beautiful countenance, twine round his neck;

³⁰ *Prose Works*, ed. by Knight, 1. 24.

³¹ *Ibid.* 1. 115, 116, 131, 134, 142, 144, 145, 146, 147, 153, 160, 161, 165, 167, 170, 172, 175, 176, 177, 179, 180, 186, 188, 194, 202, 203, 208, 210, 212, 213, 215, 220, 223, 224, 231, 233, 242, 250, 251, 252, 265, 266, 268, 276.

³² *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* 3. 47. 14.

³³ *Ibid.* 2. 21.

When the *Hic jacet* and the *Requiescat in pace* shall have felt the touch, may we assume that Dorothy Wordsworth's bramble will on that early spring-day, too, be found in the van with 'the evergreens and the palms'?³⁸

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³⁸ *Journals* 1. 14–15.